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WASHINGTON, D.C. - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) welcomes today's release of the first International Religious Freedom Report of the Obama administration, and urges the prompt designation of "countries of particular concern" (CPCs) as well as implementation of targeted policies on those countries.

"To date, President Obama has raised religious freedom in his speeches abroad without those sentiments being translated into concrete policy actions, and our hope is that this report will be the administration's call to action" said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair. "This report can serve as a solid baseline for determining effective U.S. policy toward severe religious freedom violators. The report makes clear that the United States must do more to ensure reforms are made and implemented."

The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) requires the State Department to undertake an annual review of every country to "determine whether the government of that country has engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom." Any country meeting that threshold is to be designated a "country of particular concern," and the U.S. government is required to take action to encourage improvements in each CPC country. IRFA provides a range of possibilities for such action, from negotiating a bilateral agreement to sanctions.

"Both Democratic and Republican administrations have underutilized the 'country of particular concern' designation," said Mr. Leo. "As documented in this first report under the Obama administration, religious freedoms are aggressively repressed in the nations that have been designated as CPC countries. But the facts outlined in the report demonstrate just as clearly that countries such as Pakistan and Vietnam meet the CPC statutory requirements and should be so designated."

USCIRF commissioners met with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in June regarding USCIRF's continuing recommendation that she designate as CPCs the following 13 countries: Burma, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, People's Republic of China, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. USCIRF also recommended that stronger actions be taken against the eight countries currently listed as CPCs by the State Department: Burma, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, People's Republic of China, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Uzbekistan.

USCIRF continues to differ with the State Department over the assessment of religious freedom conditions in several of those countries and the policies that should be undertaken in response. These differences include:

- The State Department publicly announced in 2006 that the Saudi government had confirmed a set of policies that were aimed at advancing religious freedom and promoting tolerance in the Kingdom. More than three years later, virtually none of the policies have been fulfilled. The only policy that had a completion date attached to it was the removal of inflammatory and intolerant passages from Saudi educational materials. That deadline passed in July 2008. The State Department's own human rights report released this year concluded that Saudi government textbooks "still retained some language that was intolerant of other religious traditions...and in some cases provided justification for violence against non-Muslims." A spot check of the religious texts used during the 2008-2009 school year shows much of the same objectionable content. Since 2005, the U.S. has invoked a waiver on any such action in the national interest.

"It is time for the United States to lift that waiver and take action under IRFA," said Mr. Leo. "This would demonstrate that the Obama administration cares about this issue, and it gives the United States much-needed leverage to urge the Saudis to make genuine, measurable improvements, including in its education system. That would be truly in our national interest."

- USCIRF has recommended since 2002 that Pakistan should be designated as a CPC, but the State Department has not followed that recommendation. A number of the country's laws, including anti-Ahmadi and anti-blasphemy laws, abridge freedom of religion or belief and contribute to an atmosphere of hostility towards, and violence against, Pakistanis who follow minority religions or dissent on religious views. After a recent incident in which a false blasphemy charge led to mob violence resulting in arson and murder, the Pakistani government announced that it was reviewing the blasphemy laws.

"As a matter of policy priority, the U.S. government should do everything it can to support this domestic effort," said Nina Shea, USCIRF commissioner. "These laws – which can be invoked by anyone – give extremists a dangerous degree of control over civil society and thus undermine other American foreign policy goals in the country and region. The repeal of these laws would be a significant step to better protect the human rights, including religious freedom, of all Pakistanis and to fight extremism in that country."

- A USCIRF delegation traveled to Vietnam in May 2009 and came away concerned about the level of police harassment of independent religious activity. USCIRF found the continued detention of religious prisoners of concern and coordinated government policies designed to suppress the growth of certain Buddhist, Hoa Hao, and Protestant groups, as evidence that Vietnam should be designated as a CPC. Since USCIRF returned, there have been detentions of Protestant religious leaders, police raids on Protestant churches and Buddhist monasteries, evictions of monks from monasteries, and violence used to dispel peaceful Catholic prayer vigils at disputed properties.

"No more excuses can be made by the administration for not designating Vietnam as a CPC," said Michael Cromartie, USCIRF Vice Chair. "There is clear evidence of severe religious freedom restrictions and the CPC designation worked in the past to bring out tangible change without hindering other bilateral interests."

USCIRF's own assessments are presented in greater detail in our 2009 Annual Report, available at <http://www.uscifr.gov>.

"Despite our policy differences, USCIRF commends the State Department, the Office of International Religious Freedom, and our diplomats abroad for their independent efforts in comprehensively surveying the abuses of and restrictions on religious freedom around the world," said Leo.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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